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< Chapter Four. Angelique III (/en/story/127504/chapter/chapter-three-zara-and-david-i-477533/)

Spring, 2031

"So you don't know the answer."

"It's not about knowing or not, it's—"

"We've been going in circles for the last ten minutes."

"Of course, and that's because—"

"Because you can't accept that you can't answer, Alez."

"But—but it's not just me; no one could answer that so easily."

"And why not?"

"It's hard to explain. Language isn't perfect, Angel. And there are... things that __"

"Huh."

"What? Why are you making that face?"

"Because you're making excuses."

I felt my right eyebrow twitch involuntarily, but I took a deep breath to hold back an insult. It's difficult sometimes to remember that Angelique isn't trying to provoke me; it's just her way.

"I'm not making excuses. And I could explain if you'd stop interrupting me so much."

"..."

"Fine. Let's start from the beginning. Could you repeat the question?"

"What comes first, the soul or the body?"

I let my half-smoked cigarette fall into the ashtray and sighed bitterly. I glanced up for a moment: the smoke I'd been exhaling for nearly an hour had already clouded the ceiling of the library. Yes, the library. Our absurdly excessive house, which could accommodate twenty people but shelters only two, also has a library. And it's not a... small library with two or three shelves. It's a *library*, in every sense of the word. Two stories high, with the upper floor enjoying a considerably higher domed ceiling supported by a thick stone pillar in the center. Who on earth owned all of this?

"It's complicated."

"Why?"

"Because there's no foundation to build on, that's why. I could tell you the body

comes first and explain why I think so, but neither of us would be satisfied with that answer."

I'd die before I could count how many books are in that library. Shelves cover every wall, and pillars scattered throughout the place hold even more. It's overwhelming; I can't imagine why anyone would build such a vast library with so many books that a lifetime wouldn't be enough to read them all.

The smoke drifted out through the upper windows, while Angelique's insistent gaze stabbed into my side. We sat next to each other at a desk pushed up against the wall, each in our own wooden chair, taking a break from my student's lessons. I tutor Angelique. There's no great mystery behind it; she's very young, and I don't like the idea of her not studying anything when she has the chance. I've learned a lot over the years, but even now I keep learning more and more with every lesson. After all, to teach her things... I have to learn them first.

"We need to tackle a few other questions before we can even begin to approach that one, Angelique."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"For starters, what do you understand by the word 'soul'?"

"Nothing. I don't know."

"Try a little harder."

"But I really don't know."

"I said, try a little harder."

"Ugh..."

"..."

"The soul... it's something like 'what we really are,' right?"

"Is that all?"

"Hm... the soul is what we truly are, and the place, the... 'thing' where our memories, feelings, and decisions are stored..."

"Your definition doesn't make any sense."

"I told you I didn't know."

The girl pouted slightly. I hadn't meant to upset her, of course, but her definition of the soul was undeniably rough. I couldn't blame her, though. In fact, I wondered what books she might have read to even form a definition on her own.

Oh, right. I started telling this story in the middle. This didn't happen too long ago. Maybe two months, or perhaps three. Angelique has grown so much... I wonder how old she is now. About three or four

years ago, when I met her, she looked almost, almost like a child, but now... now she's a young woman, isn't she? I don't know. If I had to guess, I'd say she's sixteen, maybe seventeen... or around eighteen.

And...

Wait, let me try to express myself without sounding like a creep. Angelique has grown up. Her body now has curves, and the quiet monotony of our daily life makes it impossible to ignore the development of her figure. She's also, though not by much, a bit taller; I don't have to look down as much to talk to her. Her hair has grown longer, and her blue eyes don't seem as large as before, and her smile... that... that has changed a lot. Witnessing that lovely smile is still a relatively rare event, but it's becoming less so, and... each time it brings me more peace.

"See, the tricky part about defining the soul is that no one really knows what it is.

The soul has been a topic of debate for millennia, across many civilizations."

"How can they have been searching for the answer for so long and still not found it?"

"I guess that's just how people are."

"I guess..."

"Monopsychism holds that there's only one superior soul above all others, and that the soul of each person is merely a manifestation, something like a replica, of this great soul."

"Wouldn't that mean we're all the same person?"

"Hm... maybe. I don't know. Perhaps souls aren't what make us who we are."

"Hm... well, that still doesn't help me understand what a soul is."

"You're right. Well, according to the Bible, the soul is the 'being,' meaning it's what defines the very existence of people and animals."

"Animals have souls too?"

"They say so. There are also beliefs that

don't even acknowledge the existence of a soul, like Buddhism."

"..."

"I think... I think it was Plato who said something like the soul is trapped within the body... I think. I could be wrong. Actually, I could be wrong about everything I've said."

"Alez."

"Yes?"

"You're just confusing me more."

"Oh, sorry... Okay, I'll put it this way, trying to stick to the most common understanding of the soul that most people have. I can't guarantee it's correct, but here it goes: The soul is a part of your existence that doesn't manifest physically. It has no weight, no shape, and doesn't occupy any space. However, it's where the only thing that truly defines you as an entity resides. Not memories, not experiences, not feelings, just this... this... thing we call a soul. It alone is unique and unrepeatable."

At some point during my little lecture, I

had let my gaze drift toward the cigarette slowly burning in the ashtray, and once I finished speaking, I hurried to pick it up again, taking one last, long drag before dropping the butt. I turned my eyes back to the charming girl beside me, only to find her radiant blue eyes locked onto mine, as if she were still processing my ramblings.

"Too complicated?"

"No..."

"Too long?"

"No, not that either. Just..."

"Just...?"

A smile.

One that caught me by surprise. A small, calm smile, perhaps tinged with admiration, was forming on her lips.

I'm weak.

"You were surprisingly clear, Alez. It's also obvious that you know quite a bit

about the subject."

"Not really... even if I know some terms and such, it's just superficial knowledge. I've never studied philosophy, religion, or anything that complicated in depth."

"So what have you studied in depth?"

"Nothing."

"You didn't go to school?"

"Of course I did, but you don't study anything in depth there, Angel. You just skim through general knowledge on hundreds, hundreds of things. The idea is that with that foundation, you decide what to do with the rest of your life."

"University?"

"Exactly."

"You didn't go to university?"

"No, I joined the army when I was very young. Then the war started, and... you can imagine the rest."

"No... I can't really imagine the rest."

"You already know a good part of it."

"Of what happened, yes. But not of you,

Alez."

"It's not that interesting."

"It is..."

"Hm?"

"It is to me."

Her gaze was on me again. What a powerful look this girl has. Angelique is the kind of person who can wake you just by standing beside you, staring intently. It's not quite terrifying because of how beautiful her face is, but it's definitely unsettling.

By then, we'd already exceeded our break time, but neither of us was really in the mood to continue with the lesson, so the best thing we could do was keep talking. I took another cigarette from the pack on the desk and lit it with one of the matches beside it. Angelique did the same with another cigarette.

I don't forbid her from smoking. The bullets we dodge week after week do more damage.

"The war started a few years after I joined the armed forces. My team was decimated by an Amere attack, and I ended up wandering alone across the continent. Happy?"

"No, not at all."

"No?"

"I don't want the summary! Tell me more."

"If I say there's nothing interesting, it's because there isn't, Angelique. Most of the story is just me wandering around. Looking for food, shelter, or sometimes weapons and ammunition."

"I'm not talking about the war and what came after."

"Then what?"

"Didn't you make any friends in the army?"

"Friends? That's what you're more interested in?"

Taking the cigarette from her lips and

nodding slowly, she exhaled a small cloud of smoke at the same time I did. The books didn't matter anymore. Suddenly, she no longer wanted to know what Wilde or Bradbury had written. This smoking angel was only captivated by the idea of hearing my story.

An insult to any decent novelist.

...

An angel... an angel, huh...?

As I got lost in her blue eyes, searching for the right words and trying to recall any interesting moment that might be worth something to Angelique's ears, the windows stopped letting in sunlight. Being such a large room, the change in lighting caught my attention, and I turned my head toward the glass right in front of our wooden table, gently pulling aside the worn curtain that covered it. In that instant, the clouds—responsible for the temporary darkness—moved away, allowing the golden rays to once again pierce my pupils. A cruel coincidence.

The brightness made me turn back to

Angelique and...

It happened again.

I'm talking about that... that thing. How do I define it... how do I define it without sounding insane? I know I'm not crazy. I couldn't write so coherently if I were. But... I swear they were there. I swear that every time I've seen them, they were really there. I never dared to touch them, and I don't even think Angelique knows she has them. They're just there, almost imperceptibly swaying in the surrounding particles, existing only to take my breath away and make me question every decision I've ever made. The sun illuminated them fervently, making them shine with radiant purity and exquisite brilliance, even outshining the young girl's fair skin. Divine, irreplaceable, unique in every possible sense of the word. Lifted straight from a pre-Renaissance sculpture, traced with the precision of a biblical painting, defined with the finesse and attention to detail of the most dedicated artist...

Wings. A pair of angelic white wings

sprouting from Angelique's back.

"Hng... Alez..."

She shielded her eyes from the sun, and I let go of the curtain to block out more light. When I blinked... they were gone. As if they had never been there. Not a trace.

I stopped believing in a god a long time ago, too long to swear by anyone's name, but if not that... what can I use to assure you, reader, that this thing I occasionally see on my companion's body is real?

"..."

"Alez...?"

"Yes, I can tell you a story or two."

"About your friends? About people you met in the army?"

"If that's what you want to know, then yes. You see..."

. . .

Hours passed. At some point during my long-winded story, both of us grew tired of the desk and chairs, so we moved to the center of the library, settling into that plush, circular sofa that wrapped around the central pillar. I sat with my back leaning against the pillar, and Angelique lay beside me, her head resting in my lap, listening intently as I recounted fables, my right hand gently stroking her hair while my left held another cigarette.

As a side note, I should mention that I doubt my touch could be even slightly comforting. I've never worn gloves while handling my weapons, so my cracked, rough fingers, battered by years of continuous combat, must be quite unpleasant to the touch. And yet, Angelique hasn't complained about it.

"And how did you manage to escape?"

"From the enemies or from Sergeant Kyd?"

"From all of them."

Her tone was much more cheerful, no doubt. As my fingers traced small circles on her cheek, she gave me a tender look, only enhanced by her expression of curiosity. She's a charm. Angelique is a charm. Beautiful, beyond any other compliment I could give her. I truly curse her luck for being born in such a complicated time—who knows how far she could have gone with such beauty in normal circumstances.

"Well... after making a colossal mistake like confusing the deployment coordinates, David and I ran for our lives. We were both pale with fear, and our legs hurt so much we thought they would break, but it was that or end up with a piece of lead in our skulls. Terrible idiots."

"You said the ruins helped you."

"That's right. The town of Agordo, in northern Italy, had already been destroyed months before, so the fact that everything was in ruins helped us slip away easily. I

mean, we weren't escaping from an entire company. It was probably just scattered forces, tasked with guarding the area against any attempt at recapture. I bet those poor insurgents were as surprised as we were when we ran into them."

"Did you get reprimanded?"

"What do you think? Because of the carelessness of two not-so-bright low-ranking soldiers, several platoons had to be mobilized to enter a strategically unimportant territory and eliminate hostiles in a relatively insignificant town. A total disaster. We just ran, ran, and ran, occasionally stopping to return fire, but never for more than five seconds. The darkness of the night helped too, of course; otherwise, they would've had a much easier time."

"So the platoons went in and..."

"Killed them all."

I took a long drag on my cigarette and gazed up at the high ceiling as I exhaled. Only then did I notice that the entire

room was now bathed in orange. We had spent the whole afternoon idling away.

I felt Angelique snuggle her face against my hand, and in response, I continued to caress her.

"Once Kyd informed us over the radio that the situation was completely under control and that we hadn't suffered any casualties, we emerged from our hiding spot with faces that bore no resemblance to a smile. I remember it well. David was pale, his lips trembling. I mean, even his orange hair looked as red as fire in contrast with his bloodless face. Kyd's shout said it all: 'I've never met anyone so stupid!' And the next thing I remember is two whole weeks locked up in a cell, reflecting on our mistakes."

"Two weeks?!"

"Yes, two long weeks."

"B-but two weeks in a cell is..."

"A living hell. But I still think it was a pretty light punishment. Our little mistake could have cost lives, you know?"

"Yes, but..."

"If I were in his place, I would've kicked us out of the force. Far too irresponsible. But that's old history now. The point is that we were eventually reinstated and had to endure the teasing from Zara and the others for a long time. But there's an upside: everything turned out fine, and now I can tell the story as a small, somewhat unfortunate anecdote."

"That sounds like you're forcing yourself to find the silver lining."

"Not at all. I wouldn't be telling this story in such good spirits if even one of us had taken a bullet anywhere on their body."

"Did Zara also scold you?"

"No, she understood that the higher-ups had taken care of that. She just teased us once we were free."

"Cruel..."

When I focused on her, I noticed a small smile of pity and sympathy, to which I responded with a soft sigh of resignation as I brushed aside a lock of hair covering her flawless face.

"Was it interesting?"

"Yes, it was. This is the kind of story I meant, Alez."

"You just want to distract me so you don't have to study."

"Of course not... We have all the time in the world; I can study tomorrow what we had planned for today. It's just that... how do I explain it... It's more fun listening to you reminisce about the good things from your past."

"Those kinds of comments won't save you."

I lightly tapped the tip of her nose with my fingertip and glanced toward the nearest window, now deeply orange. The

afternoon was coming to an end. Not much longer until nightfall, which meant it was time to start preparing dinner.

"Turn on the generator, and you can take a bath while I cook."

I had just started gathering the strength to move Angelique off my legs and stand up when I felt her head press a little more firmly into my lap, and in response, I just gave her a puzzled look.

"There's still one more thing."

"And that is?"

"The question that started this whole conversation."

"The..."

"About the soul."

"Oh, right. Let's see... what was it again?"

"Does the soul come first, or does the body?"

"Do you even believe there's such a thing

as a soul, Angelique?"

"Is it wrong to believe?"

"Well... believing itself isn't wrong. But I wouldn't expect you, of all people, to put your faith in something so unprovable."

"Would you rather I try to be as logical as you, Alez?"

Logical. An interesting word she used.

I've always been analytical, constantly calculating and deductive, all the time. Honestly, I've worked hard to act this way for so many years. At some point, I decided that was the best way to ensure my survival, so I put all my effort into changing my nature. Angelique only knows that side of me—she has no idea what a mess of a person I was before I became what I am now.

Assuming I'm not still a mess, albeit in a different way.

Logical...

I thought once more about the feathered limbs that, apparently, only I could see

sprouting from this girl from time to time and almost burst out laughing because of it. Logical. What a bad joke.

"No. Believe in whatever you want, Angelique. Or, better yet, put your faith in whatever brings you the most peace."

"..."

"And as for your question: I admit I don't have the answer."

"I knew it."

And then she granted me the luxury of seeing another smile, this one tinged with smugness.

Three smiles, each a different shade. I'm not obsessed; it's just that such a wide range of emotions would have been unimaginable for the Angelique I first met.

That night, dinner tasted much better than usual.

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You're beginning to realize that your dialogue is your biggest strength, methinks. Excellent work, Hazo~!

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Patricia Hernandez @sandramahler_ (/en/u/sandramahler_/)

I'm amazed by how well you describe the characters and how deeply connected they are. Seriously, amazing. The question about the soul, and just everything about this chapter is marvellous. Congratulations and thank you for writing something so beautiful!

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Sky Velleity 🔰 @velleitysoft1630117318 (/en/u/velleitysoft1630117318/)

Another beautiful chapter, Angelique so elegantly rides a line of curious, stubborn naïveté without reading like

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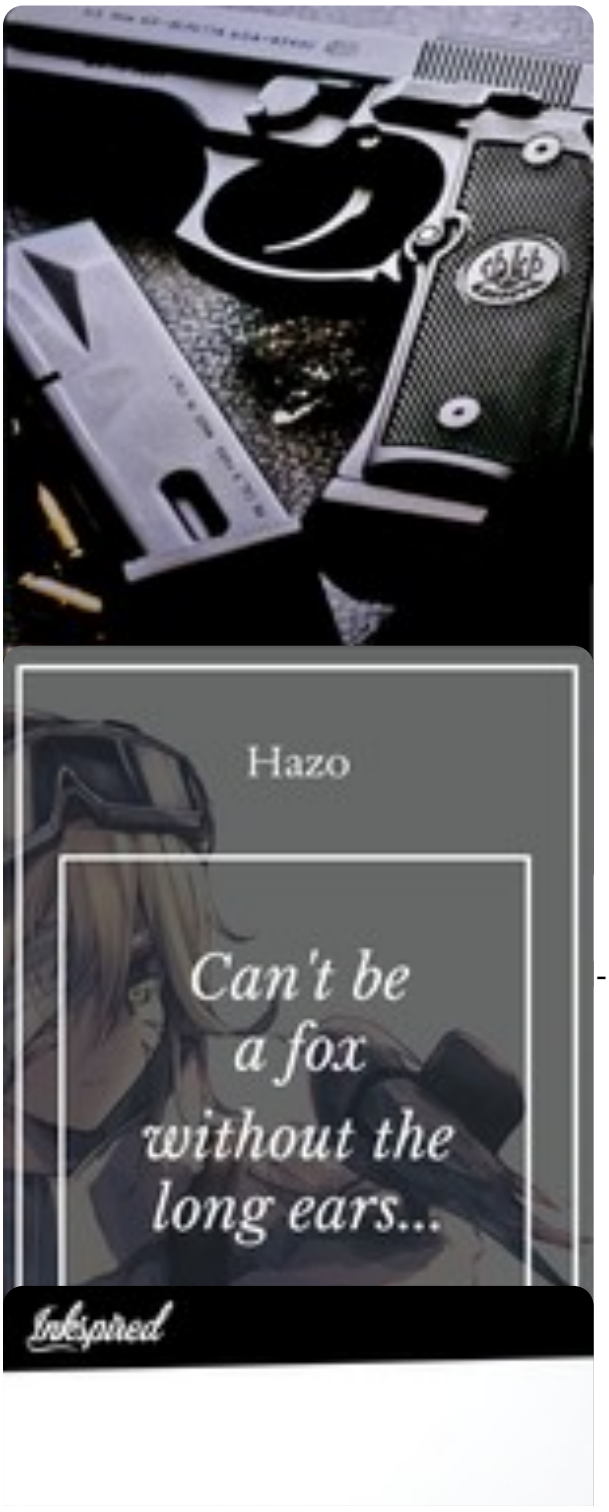

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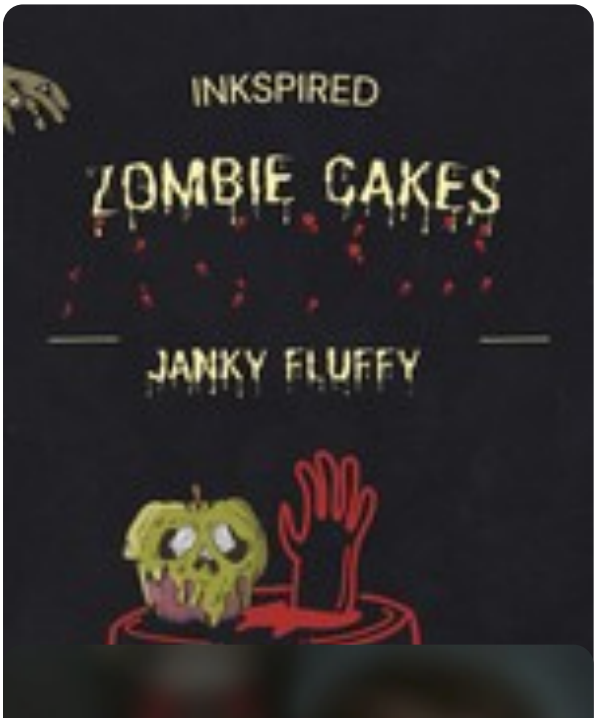

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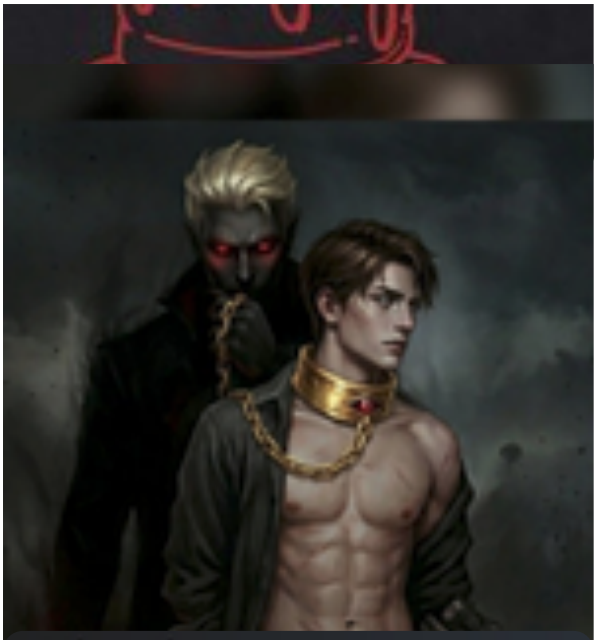

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